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## The Ethics of Nostalgia in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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# **The Ethics of Nostalgia in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things***

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He didn't know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that *personal* despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation.

— Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, 19

If ethics can be defined as rules of human conduct and relationship to others, then the ethical dimension of reflective longing consists in resistance to paranoic (*sic*) projections characteristic of nationalist nostalgia, in which the other is conceived either as a conspiring enemy or as another nationalist. The ethics of reflective longing recognizes the cultural memory of another person as well as his or her human singularity and vulnerability. The other is not merely a representative of another culture, but also a singular individual with a right to long for – but not necessarily belong to – his place of birth.

— Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 337

In spite of the broad spectrum of critical discussion surrounding Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, it is generally agreed that the novel is intent on challenging the totalizing myths of India's nationalist narratives, which discount and silence the specificity and heterogeneity of marginalized voices living within its borders. As Timothy Brennan observes, there exists a growing "neo-colonialism" in the study of the relation between nation and literature, since the impulse of contemporary authors is to highlight how (postcolonial) nations narrate themselves in mythic and problematic terms of reclaiming the community and the origins of the state through conquest or recovery of cultural heritages and traditions (57-60).

Many of these writers, like Roy, do not attempt to “participate in the mythmaking, but comment on it metafictionally,” exposing the inherent dangers of national myths to provide “a comment on the responsible practice of interpreting the images of today—how to place them, how to give them perspective, how to discuss the way they reflect a submerged history while turning it into a contemporary, instantaneous shadow” (Brennan 66-67). In other words, we can read Roy’s novel as an articulation of the necessity of questioning the nation’s representation of authority, bringing to light that which exists on its borders and margins, and ultimately demonstrating how this “plurivocality” disrupts the unity or hegemony of national discourse in order to reveal how a nation is perhaps located in its counter-narratives, its own irreducible differences (Bhabha, 301). More specifically, according to the terms of Benedict Anderson’s ubiquitously cited phrase, Roy is engaged in examining how India, like any nation, exists as an “imagined community”; or rather, *The God of Small Things* explores how we imagine that community through competing forms of nostalgia, which construct national and personal narratives of dispossession, displacement, and loss that are in direct conflict with each other.

According to Svetlana Boym, nostalgia in the twentieth century indicates “a longing for continuity in a fragmented world,” and at its worst, particularly for those who view nostalgia entirely in the negative sense, it “is an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure” (xiv). The danger of nostalgia, especially when co-opted by nationalist ideologies, is to tempt us to “relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding,” leading us ultimately “to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one”—“In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters” (xvi). The emphasis of Boym’s argument throughout her theoretical study, *The Future of Nostalgia*, is firmly placed on the need for a nostalgia that incorporates critical reflection of its own premises and fantasies, an examination and acknowledgment of its precise history and contexts of longing. This presents us with a seeming paradox, for by Boym’s own definition, nostalgia is a form of longing that works tirelessly towards erasing history in favour of the fantasy of an elusive past that perhaps did not even exist (xiii-xiv). Moreover, the reaction of those who are wholly averse to the prevalence of nostalgia in contemporary

culture is to argue for eschewing it entirely. Boym, on the other hand, argues that if nostalgia is “a symptom of our age, a historical emotion” (xvi), particularly when the modern experience is that of widespread diaspora and exile, then it is necessary to attempt a “creative rethinking of nostalgia [as] not merely an artistic device but a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming” (xvii). We cannot, in fact, think in terms of creating a cure for nostalgia, which may be impossible in itself; rather we must reconfigure it according to “a typology . . . that might illuminate some of nostalgia’s mechanisms of seduction and manipulation” (xviii) while also allowing us to resist and subvert its “dream of transcending history and memory” (17).

This dream is implicitly formulated in Ernest Renan’s 1882 lecture, “What is a Nation?”, which has been instrumental in shaping the arguments of later twentieth-century writers when addressing the same question: “To forget . . . to get one’s history wrong, are essential factors in the making of a nation; and, thus, the advance of historical study is a danger to nationality” (qtd. in Boym 15), and as Boym adds to this, “The *nostos* of a nation is not merely a lost Eden but a place of sacrifice and glory, of past suffering” (15). Thus, the nation creates its own mythology of the historical past in the attempt to unite often disparate peoples and locations into a single identity. That subsuming of the many into one is what shapes the narratives of nationalist nostalgia, which Boym classifies as restorative nostalgia, a myth-making most often found in “nationalist revivals” and consisting of only two main plots: the revisionist return to origins and conspiracy theories based on clear divisions between good and evil and “the inevitable scapegoating of the mythical enemy” (41, 43). All ambivalence, complexity, and specificity of both past and present circumstances are erased under the assertion that “Home” is always “under siege, requiring defense against the plotting enemy” who refuses homecoming and restoration of the imagined community, which did not comprise individual memories but a collective “we” (43). Such conspiracy theories often “flourish after revolutions” (43), and those who engage in this kind of nostalgia deny that it is nostalgia but rather about truth—a truth that “manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past” (41). Restorative nostalgia ignores and rejects “the signs of historical time—patina, ruins, cracks, imperfections” (45), as it obsessively attempts “to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps” (41).

As an antidote, though not necessarily a cure, to the totalizing impulses of restorative nostalgia, which “protects the absolute truth,” Boym offers the alternative of reflective nostalgia, which “calls [the truth] into doubt” (xviii). According to this typology, the two work in direct tension with each other, but should not be construed as clear-cut or overly simplified binaries; they “are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. . . . The two might overlap in their frames of reference . . . [using] the same triggers of memory and symbols . . . but [they] tell different stories” (41, 49). So how does reflective nostalgia tell a different story? It does not desire to rebuild the lost home but sets up a narrative that relishes distance, irony, fragmentation and inconclusive plots, “perpetually deferring homecoming itself”; it recognizes that the “home is in ruins” and cannot be restored because it is now beyond recognition (49-50). Defamiliarization, thus, compels the reflective nostalgic “to narrate the relationship between past, present and future” (50) while acknowledging “the imperfect process of remembrance” (41). There is no desire here to erase the gaps in knowledge, no compulsion to recover or return to an absolute point of origin, to replace historical time with mythical time. Reflective nostalgia does not reject the experience of displacement and exile but, rather, “dwells in . . . longing and loss” (41), and not as a means for dwelling in and mourning over a past that no longer exists but with the understanding that the past is capable of “inserting itself” into the present to the point where “the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historic development” (50). Although reflective nostalgia acknowledges “the irrevocability of the past and human finitude” (49), Boym reminds us:

*Re-flection* suggests new flexibility, not the reestablishment of stasis. The focus here is not on recovery of what is perceived to be an absolute truth but on the meditation on history and passage of time. . . . [Reflective nostalgia] reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection. (49-50)

In other words, the underlying ethics of a reflective nostalgia is that it allows for an accounting of “historical and individual time” (49), as opposed

to restorative nostalgia's drive towards subsuming the particularities of historical and individual memory within a unifying narrative of nationalist myths representing a collective "we", a collective that does not represent the divergent and often suppressed narratives of a nation's marginalized others.

This brings us back to Roy's novel, as it is my argument that *The God of Small Things* illustrates both types of nostalgia, exposing the dangers of one situated alongside the critical and creative possibilities of the other. In its recognition of that compulsion towards nostalgia in the construction of both national and personal narratives of loss and displacement, the text seeks out an ethics of longing and memory that allows for a critical reflection upon the historical contexts and individual choices that inform the relationship between past and present. The ethics of nostalgia in Roy's novel revolves around the recovery of the repressed narrative of Ammu's choice to disregard caste and sexual prohibitions in her affair with the Untouchable, Velutha, both of them transgressing "the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much" (Roy, 31); it is a choice that is a political as much as personal act of defiance and resistance against a social system that is founded on the repression of the marginalized others' desires. Ammu's choice ultimately disrupts the gendered and racial stratifications existing within her immediate family and the wider community, prompting from them violent disciplinary reactions as a means of preserving their own integrity and power, which of course has devastating consequences not only for Ammu but also the lives of her lover and her children. Elleke Boehmer observes:

*The God of Small Things* tirelessly worries at problems of responsibility . . . the individual and the community are positioned within criss-crossing causal webs of transnational as well as national interrelationship, which commit them to particular actions and choices. Bodies and desires, as in the repeated reference to the 'Love Laws', are strongly conceived as political" (183).

Thus, the text's overriding ethical concern with revisiting the violent and oppressive consequences of past choices and actions as necessary to recognizing (and disentangling) responsibility on the parts of individuals and the state, as well as local, national and global communities, is in

direct conflict with the impulses and mechanisms operating behind the restorative nostalgia that determines nationalist narratives.

Restorative nostalgia, in its denial of historical specificity, also seeks to deny responsibility for the past and, by extension, the present; at the national level, this denial contributes to the romanticized narrative of the people as victims, as exiles with the common goal of restoring the homeland: "it builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing" (Boym, 42). To reiterate Boym's larger point, because restorative nostalgia's re-scripting of the past also relies on a denial of displacement out of the need to establish the collective community's integrity and superiority, especially on the national level, then this kind of myth-making inevitably leads to an endless re-apportioning of blame, creating enemies or scapegoats who deny the community either homecoming or wholeness. In other words, the state denies past displacement while existing in the fear of future dispossession, thus articulating its power through a reactionary suppression of the threat of either the foreign or internalized other. As *The God of Small Things* insistently reminds us, India's colonial history of dispossession is the ghost haunting both the family and the nation, and it is this specter of loss and displacement that is simultaneously denied and passed down from generation to generation.

The symbol of this history of dispossession is first represented by Pappachi's moth, discovered by him but never named after him: "Its pernicious ghost—grey, furry and with unusually dense dorsal tufts—haunted every house that he ever lived in. It tormented him and his children and his children's children" (Roy, 49). It is also represented by the "History House," the colonial past literally located on the "abandoned rubber estate" once owned by Kari Saipu, an "Englishman who had 'gone native.' . . . Ayemenem's own Kurtz" (Roy, 52), and located more abstractly in Chacko's history lesson given to the twins, in which he informs them "they were all Anglophiles. . . . Pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away" (52). According to Chacko, the only way to understand their history is to go inside the History House and listen to their ancestors. Yet, because of the colonial past, they are cut off from these voices:

"When we try and listen, all we hear is a whispering. And we cannot understand the whispering, because our minds have been invaded by a war . . . that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves" (53).

The problem with Chacko's history lesson is that he ignores how he and others like him, those who belong to India's ruling classes, contribute to this ongoing war. The twins, of course, do enter the History House and witness for themselves all too clearly that it "is not owned solely by the colonisers, the nation outside the nation; it has also been built and occupied by the nation as it institutionalises violence within its own borders" (Friedman, 122). Chacko and Pappachi, who never laid claim to his discovery partly because of his willingness to accept his powerlessness to challenge institutionalized rules, view themselves as romanticized victims of their colonial heritage. At the same time, due to the embedded oppressions of a patriarchal system, they wield a great deal of power over the women and children in their family. At one point, Ammu bitterly reminds Chacko of the reality, that in "our wonderful male chauvinist society," he has every right to claim, as he does: "What's yours is mine and what's mine is also mine" (57). Ammu, the twins, Velutha, and even Mammachi and Baby Kochamma, in spite of their complicities with that system of oppression, are the truly dispossessed in this society. Pappachi's moth will flutter and beat its pernicious way into Rahel's heart whenever she feels threatened, as a child, with the loss of her mother's love, which represents for the twins their only secure place of belonging in this world since they are marginalized by the rest of the family according to its own internalized stratifications of power based on who deserves to be loved and how much.

The Love Laws themselves derive from the "ancient, age-old fear . . . of being dispossessed" (Roy, 70), and more importantly, these laws are not strictly left over from the colonial heritage but are also rooted in India's own caste and gender traditions. Roy's text indicates that the social, political and cultural divisions in India have been strengthened rather than weakened due to the postcolonial nationalist narrative, which in the denial of its history of dispossession has insisted on the agenda of returning to its precolonial origins, a nostalgic narrative that relies on "restored or invented



tradition" in order to establish continuity with the past (Boym, 42). This restorative move problematically rests on two paradoxes :

First, the more rapid and sweeping the pace and scale of modernization, the more conservative and unchangeable the new traditions tend to be. Second, the stronger the rhetoric of continuity with the historical past and emphasis on traditional values, the more selectively the past is presented (Boym, 42).

For India, then, the nationalist rhetoric has been centered on the question of how to situate the postcolonial subject or new nation in relation to traditional values:

Recourse to these traditional values, however, is based on a denial: the desire to disregard the historical fact of colonialism itself, to pretend that it is possible to forget the violent interruption of colonialism and carry on in the present by denying the recent past (Sawhney, 89).

As Sabina Sawhney observes, "the heaviest burden of carrying these values fell on women" (89), and according to Hema Chari, although Mahatma Gandhi "encouraged women to participate in the public sphere of politics and nation-building," there existed "a crucial blindness within the nationalist movement . . . even as it appropriated women for the nationalist cause, it failed to address the question of their subjectivity" (122). When it did address that question, women were not allowed to participate in defining their new roles or identities in the modern nation (Sawhney, 89) but were displaced to the ambivalent positioning of fulfilling "their roles as both political activists and as preservers of the traditional concepts of femininity" (Chari, 123). The models for that femininity were based on "myths and legends of India's past . . . on stories of all-sacrificing [and self-abnegating] women . . . exemplars . . . constantly invoked to silence any dissatisfaction felt by Indian women about the narrow confines of their activity" (Sawhney, 102). Women were, thus, expected to be both political subject and traditional object; to vocally support India's nationalist movement while also embodying and protecting the spiritual essence of Mother India. Immobilized as maternal objects of worship, confined within the private sphere as caretakers, and denied agency or sexuality, they were allowed only suffering and silence in order to preserve "the core of nationalist

culture . . . [which was] to safeguard . . . Indian womanhood" from any corrupting influences of the West (Chari, 123, 125, 132; Sawhney, 90, 100-102). The inherent contradictions in the demands placed on Indian women reveal how they are ultimately enclosed in a patriarchal system, in which, as Ketu Katrak observes:

"Male power and male sexuality are legitimate; female sexuality, understood as female power, must be controlled and bounded through social custom, primarily within marriage. . . . [W]omen are socialized into subsuming sexuality within a spiritual realm, leaving behind the realms of the physical, of desire, of pleasure" (qtd. in Chari, 136, note 7).

To return to Roy's novel, the "problem" with Ammu is her "Unsafe Edge", or rather, her desire and persistent longing to act on that desire, situating her outside her assigned maternal role: "A liquid ache spread under her skin . . . there was something restless and untamed about her. As though she had set aside the morality of motherhood and divorceehood. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk" (Roy, 44). Acutely aware of the suffocating position of upholding her society's traditional roles of femininity, Ammu ends up harbouring within herself "an unmixable mix": "The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber" (44). This is what eventually drives her to break the Love Laws, risking any tenuous place she holds in her family and community, because "she lived in the penumbral shadows between two worlds, just beyond the grasp of their power" (44). Ammu has long feared "that for her, life had been lived," that she had already made the wrong choice in marrying the wrong man partly out of her desire to escape her family in Ayemenem and partly because marriage is the only option available to her (38-39). Marriage, however, provides her with no protection or freedom. Even if she briefly experiences the illusion of being a "modern" Indian woman, attending parties and smoking cigarettes, she is, in fact, reduced to a sexual object of exchange when her alcoholic husband agrees to his white employer's proposition to trade his wife for job security (40-42), thus, doubly situating Ammu as a patriarchal and colonial possession. When she flees back to her family, there is no security or acceptance for her there either, as Pappachi "didn't believe that an Englishman, *any* Englishman, would covet another man's wife" (42).

Thus, the nationalist “return” to traditional values and roles imposed on Indian women guarantees them as little protection or autonomy as when the colonial occupiers were in power. However, even if Ammu is left with “no position anywhere at all” (Roy, 45), no real home or place from which she might ultimately protect either herself or her children, her marginality confirms upon her a “dangerous power” to disrupt social contracts of purity by crossing established gender and caste boundaries; yet her “unconventional movements across these unforgiving boundaries corrupt her ‘two-egg twins’ and draw them into her placelessness, where the systemic Love Laws punish them for the very threat they pose to the social order” (Froula, 39, 41). Thus, regardless of whether or not the entire family has problems with classification, regardless of whether or not “they all broke the rules” (Roy, 31), Ammu and her children are positioned as the scapegoats for these transgressions, “made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family” (Roy, 5). This is a positioning to which they have been consigned long before Sophie Mol’s death, long before Ammu “defiled generations of breeding” (Roy, 258), and not only because of her mix-caste affair but also because her children are “Half-Hindu Hybrids” (Roy, 45), the product of a mixed marriage and, thus, in the minds of the family, polluted, living “where they really had no right to be” (Roy, 45).

In fact, according to the script of nationalist nostalgia, which is aimed at restoring the country to a “purer” place and time, no one has a right to belong to the homeland unless belonging to the “indigenous elites” (Sawhney 94). Anyone who disrupts the purity of that identity stands as a direct threat to the integrity of the nation, drawing “attention to historical incongruities between past and present and, thus, [questioning] the wholeness and continuity of the restored [traditions]” (Boym, 44-45). At one point, in her fierce desire to protect her children from reminders of their “placelessness”, Ammu reprimands Rahel that she must learn “the difference between CLEAN and DIRTY, especially in this country” (149). This is something of which all the “Foreign Returnees” are reminded upon their return to the home country, greeting “with love and a lick of shame” families who stayed behind until eventually the “small cracks” appear and grow and they are once more “trapped outside the History House . . . their dreams re-dreamed” (Roy, 140-141). The small cracks are the reminders that from the Western perspective of their colonial heritage they are all “dirty”, as well as the reminders that the social and racial inequalities in India are also embedded

in the postcolonial narrative's insistence on returning to the purity of the precolonial past, which allows no place for dissent or outsiders, as Sabina Sawhney so lucidly argues :

An unproblematic acceptance of the unity of a precolonial with the postcolonial subject depends heavily on a discourse that censors those elements which indicate a threat to this seamless identity. This threat comes into existence through those discourses that depend on nostalgia to produce a naturalized national subject: inevitably male, middle or upper class, and belonging to the dominant ethnic and religious group: 'Once upon a time we were all princes . . . .' The radical exclusion of others from this essentialized national subject produces a gap between the identity and the people to whom it refers. . . . once independence has been achieved, the subject of that independent nation has now no more negotiations to manage, no more issues of identity to resolve, has in fact foreclosed all possibilities of doubt and confusion. If doubt and confusion still exist, if people still articulate their dissatisfaction with the existing order of things, it is because the attack on the 'indigenous elites' is motivated by the lingering influence of colonial ideologies. (94)

In light of the above, we can see further why Ammu's transgression of caste boundaries is viewed as such a threat to both her family and the wider community. The threat is especially located in her gender, since Chacko, one of the indigenous elites, engages in the same illicit activities—sex with lower caste workers, his marriage to a white woman, his own hybrid-mongrel child—transgressions permitted, ignored and simply chalked up to "Men's Needs" (Roy, 168). Ammu's gender and illicit desire "eclipse the risk" (Froula, 40) he poses since, according to Therese Saliba: "'with the hybridization of culture resultant from colonialism, indigenous women's bodies have come to signify, within indigenous male ideology, sites of cultural impurity, bodies polluted or sickened by 'diseases' of Western influence'" (Froula, 40). According to this premiss, Ammu's body is "a contact zone where the West's sexual revolution of the 1960s penetrates Indian patriarchy," and so she is already corrupted before her affair with

Velutha; her rebellion, then, is to “refuse to carry the burden of postcolonial corruption” and to use her body as an expression “of freedom and sexual pleasure” (Froula, 40). Thus, Ammu’s choice is a dissenting attack upon her family and society; it “endangers those who uphold the Love Laws” (Froula, 40). Her act of sexual freedom ultimately represents a disruptive threat to the nationalist narrative since her desire is viewed as a force coming from outside the nation’s borders, as a degenerative corruption inherited from the colonial past.

More problematically, Ammu is not only punished for transgressing the Love Laws, but also because her family “did not even remotely suspect that the missile, when it was fired . . . would come from a completely unexpected quarter” (Roy 168). The family refuses to comprehend why Ammu behaves as she does, insisting on remaining in denial of the source of her anger: “Because Ammu had not had the kind of education, nor read the sorts of books, nor met the sorts of people, that might have influenced her to think the way she did” (180). Roy is implicitly commenting here on how an oppositional feminism often grows out of one’s marginalized place in any system of oppression and that it does not have to be something imported from “outside”. In other words, attacks on “third-world” women who support feminism, or women who behave in ways not scripted for them by the nationalist narrative of upholding traditional roles of femininity, often occur in the form of accusing them of imitating the Western values, attitudes, or ideologies of the colonizers—as if there might not exist “local conditions that produce indigenous forms of feminism” (Friedman, 115). As Roy goes on to demonstrate, it is the abusive violence of patriarchy in Ammu’s own childhood home that determines her experiences, observations, anger, and resistance:

[She] had watched her father weave his hideous web.  
. . . As she grew older, Ammu learned to live with [his] cold, calculating cruelty. She developed a lofty sense of injustice and the mulish, reckless streak that develops in Someone Small who has been bullied all their lives by Someone Big. She did exactly nothing to avoid quarrels and confrontations. In fact, it could be argued that she sought them out, perhaps even enjoyed them. (180-182)

If the nationalist narrative operates according to a restorative nostalgia that demands a return to tradition accompanied by a suppression of anyone who attempts to speak or maneuver outside that delimiting space, then this is a narrative that works specifically to displace women: for "how can a woman feel 'at home' when her home is built upon gender oppression?" (Friedman, 114). Indeed, Roy's polemical writing, as seen in her 1998 essay, "The End of Imagination", asserts that women's identities are inevitably "situated outside any nation defined in chauvinistic terms" (Boehmer, 183). Roy argues that if making any reasonable protest against the underlying violent and (self)-destructive mechanisms within her country is considered "anti-national, then I secede"—then: "I hereby declare myself an independent, mobile republic. I am a citizen of the earth. I own no territory. I have no flag. I'm female. Immigrants are welcome" (Boehmer, 183). This, of course, echoes Woolf's similar statement from *Three Guineas*, and reiterates, as Susan Friedman observes:

the problem for women who identify with their nation in its struggles against outside domination has been how to bring about changes in the gender system without being discredited as traitors to their own people. This problem takes on its most intense forms when the state resists violence imposed from outside its borders—often in the name of the 'motherland' or the colonised nation as feminised victim (the nation as female body)—at the same time that it sanctions or turns a blind eye to male violence against women within its borders. (114)

Roy herself speaks from an ambivalent position, as someone who strongly identifies with her nation yet remains situated as one of its displaced, remaining an internal exile due to the recognized gender oppressions within her country, as well as her vocal activism criticizing India's economic exploitations of minorities and socio-political inequalities. Much of her work questions the notion of "home" as a place of belonging, while seeking "a political vantage point from which demands for social justice and equality can be voiced" (Boehmer, 186) in order to show how "home . . . is the intersection of different modes of inhabitation, the product of different narratives of history" (Boehmer, 185). Accordingly, we might read Roy as

a reflective nostalgic who rejects the totalizing premises of a restorative nostalgia that goes into nation building and nationalist myth-making. She is concerned with internal displacements that are paradoxically rooted in the loss of a promised future, the failed, and perhaps utopian, promise of a nation as a place that allows for multiple modes of belonging and difference. In this sense, Roy demonstrates an ethical longing that allows for critical judgment of the failures of the past, using "countermemory" as a subversive tool in challenging "the official bureaucratic and political discourse", which might provide "an alternative way of reading [the past]" (Boym, 62).

*The God of Small Things* engages in a reflective nostalgia that "performs a labour of grief both through pondering pain and through play [with the past and present] that points to the future" (Boym, 55). The text mourns the loss of a nation that never existed because it failed to fulfil its promise. Its ethical longing for the failed promise of "Tomorrow" is located specifically in the shared desire of the transgressive lovers, Velutha and Ammu, as the narrative repeatedly circles back on that failure of yesterday in order to explore and recover the narrative (and body) of the other, to show where and how the promise of tomorrow should have been fulfilled. It is a densely fragmented narrative, which refuses to follow a clear linear time-frame or offer any "cut and dried moral distinctions", since the ethical imperative for any writer who engages in a reflective nostalgia derives from his or her willingness "to take risks and reveal with honesty with regard to the past the ethical ambivalences and entanglements that any survivor of that system had to confront" (Boym, 340-341). Much of the novel is a retracing of the traumatic loss and displacement that the twins, Rahel and Estha, experience as children due to the loss of their mother and each other. They are incapable of making sense of their history yet are compelled to do so when they return home as adults and, perhaps, to lay claim in whatever small way they can to that history, to take possession of their history as a means of reclaiming themselves. The actual possibility of their ability to do this, however, remains a tenuous hope, one that has perhaps already been foreclosed by the violence of the past, which cannot be erased.

As Boym points out, for the reflective nostalgic, "homecoming does not signify a recovery of identity; it does not end the journey in the virtual space of imagination. . . . Voluntary and involuntary recollections . . . [are] shattered by experiences of collective devastation" (50-51). Since Roy's text is so focused on recovering the site of trauma, it is also useful to apply Freud's view of nostalgia, in that it is "not a specific disease but a fundamental structure of human desire linked to the death drive: 'The finding of an object is always a refinding of it.' . . . [and] the only way of 'returning home' is through analysis and recognition of early traumas" (Boym, 53-54). Reflective nostalgia is in many ways directly related to the uncanny. Reflective nostalgics are haunted by the return of the repressed, as they "see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts" (Boym, 251). Rahel and Estha are perpetually living with the ghosts of the past, and due to the nature of their trauma, time for them has become frozen like Rahel's toy watch with the hands painted on it at ten to two. This is symbolic itself of how in spite of the text's fluid narrative movements between past and present, that narrative is fixated on recovering the events of those two weeks before Sophie's and Velutha's deaths, before the twins' innocence is forever shattered.

David Punter reads the novel's "refusal to review the past as something that is over and done with" (193) as indicative of how the "heritage" of the past "becomes the 'heart of darkness,' the very means of obscuring history from sight, the false and crazy monstrosity erected on the site of the colonial, the edifice of denial" (195); and though "the entire novel . . . can be seen as a painful exploration of the hidden roots of trauma . . . the results of this exploration can never be submitted to a single interpretation" (198). Cara Cilano, however, argues that rather than reading the novel's meditation on time and trauma as a commentary on "the impossibility of narrating a complete history" (which, in some ways, seems to frustrate Punter), we should view its "haunting as harbingers of possible futures"; or, according to the ethical imperative of the text, we are urged to question what the traces of these ghosts leave for future generations in terms of recognition, responsibility and justice (26). Cilano situates her argument in the contexts of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and its overarching emphasis on the need "to learn to live with ghosts" as strategies for disrupting the certainties of history's master narratives and



their pretence of truth: "Ongoing recognition of the ghost makes possible the visibility of the otherwise invisible or spectral, thereby presenting another way to live" (27).

The problem, though, for Rahel and Estha, is that they are incapable of recognizing or living with their ghosts because their reading of the past is distorted by the disproportionate level of guilt for which they've been convinced they are responsible. They are incapable of acknowledging that they themselves are in any way victims:

It would have helped if they could have made that crossing. If only they could have worn, even temporarily, the tragic hood of victimhood. Then they would have been able to put a face on it, and conjure up fury at what had happened. Or seek redress. And eventually, perhaps, exorcize the memories that haunted them. (Roy 191)

Anger and justice are not available to them because they have been made into the guilty ones, and even if they know, as adults, "that there were several perpetrators", there was "only one victim" (191)—Velutha: she "left behind a hole in the Universe through which darkness poured like liquid tar. Through which their mother followed without even turning to wave goodbye. She left them behind, spinning in the dark, with no moorings, in a place with no foundation" (191-192). Although Roy rejects the kind of victimhood that the restorative nostalgia of nationalist myths encourages, as the text persistently calls for the need to recognize individual responsibility and complicity with an oppressive system—even to the point of suggesting there are in fact no innocent bystanders, she does question here the extent to which there is an imbalance of guilt, responsibility and justice. The trauma of the twins' separation from each other, the loss of their mother and innocence, can never be validated because the larger nationalist narratives of Big God, or the agenda of a nation's public longing for cohesion and, thus, erasure of the violent past and its displacements, always take precedence over the narratives that fall into the realm of Small God, the personal despair and loss of the nation's displaced and marginalized others (Roy, 19).

In other words, even while the text mourns the children's loss of innocence, it also recognizes that the innocence of the historical past is an illusion because it never, in fact, existed, something we are always reminded of through the use of foreboding hints of the future. For instance, when Rahel, Ammu and Baby share a clumsy, intimate moment in a bathroom stall: "She knew nothing then, of how precious a feeling this was. *Like friends*. They would never be together like this again" (95). Of course, it never really was like this, like friends, and to believe that it was, as Roy suggests, is to fall into the lie of restorative nostalgia, a fantasy of the past that resists recognizing the corruptions of memory or the need for taking individual responsibility for one's choices and actions, no matter how small or big they may have been. Thus, though the twins' recognition of the roles they played in the past, the choice they made, and the guilt they feel over this throughout their lives "is almost automatically predetermined", since as children they are constantly reminded of their marginal position and the threatened loss of their mother's love, they persist in returning to the site of trauma, and "this moment of return and recognition also entails an acknowledgment of the [past] by a character who would rather suppress it" (Cilano. 36). Indeed, Baby Kochamma is emblematic of a restorative nostalgic.

Baby is a grotesque parody of her youthful self. She is "*living her life backwards*" (22), nostalgically clinging to the memory of her unrequited love for Father Mulligan (24) and endlessly weighing her own level of responsibility for the past (21), if only to remain in denial of it "as though she had nothing to do with the Sowing and Reaping" (31). She is now in sole possession of the family home and only because she has outlived everyone else (28). Fiercely vigilant over this possession after a lifetime of dispossession, as an unmarried daughter with no real power or place in her family and society, she trusts nothing and no one, creating perpetual enemies who might take away her belongings: "She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture" (28). The return of the twins is viewed as an invasion of not only her property but also her version of the past: "She deemed them Capable of Anything. Anything at all. *They might even steal their present back*" (29).

This, in fact, seems to be their intention, and the now ruined childhood home is on their side, as the twins painfully engage in an excavation of their memories. When Rahel returns to the house in Ayemenem, “swollen cupboards creaked”, and “locked windows burst open” (9), as if ready to burst with the years of holding back a rotten and rotting past, “the way memory bombs still, tea-coloured minds” (10). Likewise, the now poisoned Meenachal River, “once a site of childhood and adult fantasy and escape” (Froula, 43), has been transformed into a “smelly paradise” of global tourism (Roy, 125), which “cannot cleanse away the corruption of its history” (Froula, 43). Rahel is “looking for something”, determined to bring “out hidden things” (155). She is hoping to recover and salvage the memory of Ammu before Estha was Returned, before the trauma of their separation, because it is too unbearable to remember their mother after the events that led to the loss of her children. Rahel is plagued by guilt over her rejection of Ammu the last time she saw her—“Wild. Sick. Sad” (159)—and Estha blames himself for Ammu dying all alone, having given up all hope (325). As children they could not understand their story, or the part that Ammu played in the unravelling of their “little family” (321), and so “with the self-centredness of children, held themselves wholly culpable for her grief” (324).

If the text is seeking responsibility though not necessarily blame—since Estha and Rahel “didn’t ask to be let off lightly” but “only asked for punishments that fitted their crimes” (326)—then the cause for much of that grief and guilt leads back to Baby. She is the one who accuses them of being murderers (316) and then forces upon them their impossible choice: to save Ammu or to send her to jail (318): “The Inspector asked his question. Estha’s mouth said Yes. Childhood tiptoed out. Silence slid in like a bolt. Someone switched off the light and Velutha disappeared” (320). The children choose to believe in the fiction that Velutha did not die until their mother “shook it out of them. But by then it was too late” (320), and even if Ammu and the twins didn’t die, then their “knowledge that they had loved a man to death” (324) certainly meant for them “the end of living” (321). It is the end of living because any small hope or promise for the future has been snuffed out, as the institutionalized violence of both the family and state, in their desperation to uphold the Love Laws and punish anyone who transgresses them, because transgression gives the lie to

that narrative of tradition and purity, reveals how truly powerless they are in freely determining their own futures.

They are trapped in the confines of the larger oppressive nationalist myth, and so Estha's "Yes"—an affirmation to save his mother but co-opted by the police in order to justify Velutha's death-sentence—is just one of the "small" moments in the text that are endlessly revisited because:

a few dozen hours can affect the outcome of whole lifetimes. And that when they do, those dozen hours, like the salvaged remains of a burned house . . . must be resurrected from the ruins and examined. Preserved. Accounted for. Little events, ordinary things, smashed and reconstituted. Imbued with new meaning. Suddenly they become the bleached bones of a story. (Roy, 32-33)

This is the ethical task of the novel itself, which is not so much to discover how it all began, since Roy acknowledges that to focus on one beginning as the cause is "only one way of looking at it" and that the beginning can always be traced back to a further cause; or rather, the "true" origin is when the Love Laws were first established (33). However, because there is no absolute knowledge of the precise point of origin for these, as they are perhaps universal to all civilizations, to all nations that found themselves on rejecting what they deem to be other, Roy remains focused on telling just one "small" story. Although that story allegorizes the larger narratives of oppression and violence, Roy localizes it, showing its specificity, since "for practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical world" (34), we must determine some sort of (historical rather than mythical) beginning or the story would never be told.

This story, then, is centred on the origin of Ammu's desire for Velutha and is intent on recovering the (m)other's desire which has been repressed, because in Ammu's and Velutha's shared gaze of desire, "centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment," "history was wrong-footed, caught off guard," and they see all the "things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history's blinkers"—"simple things" (176). They recognize that they are both a man and woman who have something to give the other—that Ammu is not merely Rahel's mother but an individual who, in

turn, desires the individual, Velutha, as well as the freedom to desire without the constraints of history's master narratives that determine "who should be loved. And how. And how much" (328). It is not just the narrator but also Estha and Rahel who are trying to recover some measure of freedom inherent in the ethical promise of their mother's desire, to make sense of the fragments of their story, which signifies "an entire culture cut off from self-knowledge by the violent imposition of a different set of rules" (Punter, 199). Their act of incest, however, is not an act of "shared . . . happiness, but hideous grief" (Roy, 328) because they know that the notion of home and belonging remains precarious. For they cannot simply erase their past trauma of loss and separation and become whole again, even if Rahel appears "to have grown into the skin of her mother" (92) and "he was the one she had known before Life began" (93). As Punter points out: "The figuration of the fantasy of wholeness as incest underscores the impossibility of moving forward into free, independent relationships while the entire apparatus of caste and empire binds and forbids at every move" (199).

On the other hand, the novel does not end with the utter despair of the twins' transgressive act but shifts immediately to the scene of Ammu and Velutha's beginning their affair. Ammu's promise of "Tomorrow," although never fulfilled, resists despair or closure and Roy "asks us as readers to consider its position as the novel's last word as a sort of plea for justice in the future" (Cilano, 29-30). Moreover, Roy never suggests that an idealized home would have saved Ammu, her children, or any of the other oppressed figures in the text, thus eschewing a nostalgia that is no more than an idealized fantasy of the past (Upstone, 74). The children and lovers do, however, reclaim a marginal space of belonging and safety by "asserting their identity on the most intimate spatial scale"—their bodies—and so even if *The God of Small Things* appears to be "a hopeless novel, there is optimism in the fact that while characters may be unable to re-vision their lives at national level, their deferral of such subversions to seemingly 'smaller' spaces offers some opportunity for the marginal to assert its voice" (Upstone, 76-77).

Overall, the text seeks a route back to the recovery of what has been repressed by the nationalist narrative, and it is not simply a recovery

of the mother (or motherland), but the ethical promise of the mother's desire. Because Ammu's choice refuses the paternal laws regulating women and caste, thus defying state powers, her promise of "Tomorrow" holds out for the possibility of a future when all are permitted to desire freely (Thormann 305). Janet Thormann's reading here is somewhat problematically utopian, since, according to the novel's narrative structure, even if we end on that promise, we have already witnessed its devastating effects on the lives of Ammu, Velutha, and the twins (Cilano, 29), who, like the narrative itself, seem to be trapped in the confines of a continuous reenactment of the return of the repressed. If, as Punter argues, this confirms the novel "seeks to tell a story while reminding us that the story cannot be told" (194), then I would add that the novel's insistent urge towards recovering the narrative of Ammu's choice, a narrative buried by time, memory, trauma and those who want to refuse it ever happened (i.e., Baby Kochamma, Comrade Pillai), stands at the heart of the novel's search for an ethics of nostalgia. To read *The God of Small Things* as a narrative of reflective nostalgia allows for a deepened understanding of the ways in which it proposes an ethics of longing and memory that allows for the other to assert her desire, her difference, her story, and as a form of resisting and subverting the larger nationalist narrative that denies the desires, differences and despair of its marginalized others.

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